



## Do You Need a New Battle Strategy?

When I decided to write an article on resolving conflicts in relationships, I put out some feelers to see how those around me solve their own conflicts. My brother-in-law suggested that there isn't one solution that will work with everyone, but after doing some research and talking to some experts in couples counseling, I think there are some core ideas that can help lead to more peaceful relationships.

When someone does something to make us angry, it's only natural to lash back. But often times, doing so only makes the situation worse. If you are able to take a moment to reflect on the situation, rather than acting by reflex, you may find a way to smooth things out and make both parties happy with the outcome. It's also important to realize that conflict is a normal, natural part of every healthy relationship. "If there were no conflict, I would be concerned that at least one party is too adaptive and yielding at his or her own expense," said Dr. Dorothea Hover-Kramer, psychotherapist and author of *Second Chance at Your Dream*.

Realizing that men and women respond differently to conflict is a key component to resolving issues. Maryanne Comaroto, an internationally known radio talk show host, relationship expert, and author says it well: "The problem with solving conflict in relationship is most of us women don't really want to solve the problem. We want men to hear us, to care deeply about our feelings and needs, and then after this unilateral summit, have our partner never do whatever they did again—ever—that made us feel that way. Or at minimum, admit they were wrong and apologize with chocolate, flowers, perhaps jewelry, a night on the town or a proposal of marriage. Bottom line, we don't take responsibility for our feelings and experience 9 times out of 10 and would rather blame our partner, calling him insensitive, indifferent or self-centered."

This may seem a little harsh, but I definitely identify with these ideas. When I am angry at my husband, I don't really care about the issue as much as the feeling that my desires are being ignored, and I do just want him to put his energy into making me feel better. And if it's through "gifts" of love, I'll take them! Of course, he realizes "solving" our arguments this way isn't productive in the long run, and he has rarely attempted a "make-up" by showering me with gifts. Instead, he makes us both get down to the heart of the problem, and through talking everything out, forces us to see each other's perspectives. Sure it's a healthy way to solve our problems, but a little jewelry every now and then to make amends wouldn't hurt either!

My husband's response to conflict in our marriage at least in part reflects what Comaroto says about how men typically react: "Men ... want to solve the problem; that's what they do—as long, of course, as they're not the problem. Because then they would have to admit they didn't know how to do it right, or perhaps change their behavior. And while men have many strengths they bring to a relationship, admitting they don't know how to do something isn't one of them. Bottom line, most men don't want to take any responsibility for their part in the conflict and would rather judge their partner as overly sensitive, hormonal or needy." My husband definitely wants to solve the problem and goes about doing so methodically. But in contrast to the rest of Comaroto's statements, I am lucky enough to be married to a man that can and does take responsibility when it's called for. Of course, I have been accused of suffering from PMS — albeit correctly — from time to time.

In the responses I received from so many relationship professionals and life coaches, I found a few other common themes in the advice they had to offer:

- \* No name calling or yelling.
- \* Look at the situation from their perspective.
- \* Take a time out.
- \* Listen, listen, and listen some more. Don't just hear the other person's words, but try to understand what is behind them.
- \* Reflect on ourselves and our reactions. Does the offending action merit the resulting reaction? Often there are deeper issues at hand.
- \* Think about what you can do in your life outside of the present conflict that will better help you cope with conflict when it does arise.

Leslie McKee, a Certified Family Manager Coach™ offers her favorite tip: Always hold hands when having a discussion that may become an argument. It is nearly impossible to fight with someone who is holding your hand! Elisabeth Manning of Conscious Conception Energy Coaching expands on this idea, emphasizing the importance of sitting near the other person, and “hold them or hold their hand, or at least make a point to touch, never breaking contact through the talk. Touch dissolves barriers and guards that we put around our heart that we have such a hard time letting down even though we want to. It is a path to getting to the core issues and reminds the other as well as ourselves that we really DO want to get closer at the end of it all, even if we feel otherwise in the moment!”

Carolyn Gerard, a family counselor, tells clients “that it’s not the “things” or the “issues” that are the problem, but what happens to you on an emotional level (feel rejected, put down, hurt, like you don’t matter, he/she doesn’t care anymore) when there is conflict.” Adding to this concept, Dr. Ingrid Schweiger says, “The key to resolving ANY conflict is knowing how to listen and agreeing to the rules for fair fighting. The true art of listening involves hearing and understanding the feelings behind the words.” When Schweiger works with couples, she lays down some ground rules from the start, teaching them the do’s and don’t’s of listening. “We practice, practice, practice and learn how to listen reflectively, so you can acknowledge — not agree or disagree — what your partner is saying.” Schweiger also reminds us that sometimes we simply have to agree to disagree. “If you are escalating, and the conflict is going nowhere, call a time out and agree to pick this up later or in a day or two. Letting the dust settle gives you both time to not only consider each other’s point of view, but also time to think up some additional solutions. If it’s all about my way versus your way, you are missing many great opportunities to think outside of the box.”

Of course, talking out your problems with friends can sometimes help you see things from a different perspective, when you are having trouble doing so on your own. Don’t use the opportunity simply to vent your issues, and seek reinforcement for “your side”. Encourage your friends to be honest with you in order for you to see the situation from another angle. When I recently got in an argument with my husband, I knew I wasn’t ready to discuss it with him on a mature, productive level. I called my friend venting, ultimately making it “all about me”. But while describing the conflict to her, without realizing it, I described what I thought his perspective was, which she then pointed out to me. I realized then that his feelings were as valid as mine, and until that moment, I had not been prepared to acknowledge them. When we finally discussed the matter, I started by letting him know that I understood his view of the situation, and gave him the reasons I saw things differently, which he accepted. Instead of trying to figure out who was wrong and who was right, we dissipated the dispute simply by allowing for each other’s feelings and view points.

Melody Brooke, who also practices marriage and family counseling makes this suggestion: “The next time your partner is angry with you. Stop. Don’t do what you always have done. This time, notice the hurt or fear and say something to indicate that you noticed they are hurting, like “I’m sorry, I can see there is something I did that hurt you. Can you tell me what’s going on?” Give her some indication that you understand she is hurting. Let him know that you care that he is hurt. Odds are you will find out that the upset wasn’t really about you, but about something from your partner’s history. So be open, be curious and empathetic. This will allow their anger to bring you closer instead of pushing you further apart.”

Sometimes the key to ending conflict peacefully is to focus on yourself and your relationship when you are not experiencing conflict. Dr. Susan Fletcher, a family and marriage therapist, and author of two books (*Working in the Smart Zone*, 2008 and *Parenting in the Smart Zone*, 2005) offers these suggestions:

1. Learn to self soothe when tension is present. Many people think it is the other spouse’s responsibility to make them feel better. In fact, it is important to be able to calm yourself down rather than needing your spouse to “do something” to make you feel better. Make yourself feel better and have a conversation with yourself to keep your cool.
2. Focus on “repair attempts” rather than “resolving issues.” Some issues are not resolvable. Let’s face it. But agreeing to disagree just may not cut it. Work to “maintain a level of satisfaction despite your difference” to build a better marriage. Don’t sacrifice your relationship in the name of being right or getting the last word.
3. Maintain healthy behaviors even when life is stressful. Try and get at least 30 minutes of sustained exercise a day and eat healthy foods. Treating your body well will go a long way in helping you manage the stress of marital difficulties. Consider exercise and healthy foods a prescription for feeling better.

Fletcher points out the importance of taking responsibility for creating a tense environment when marriage makes you grumpy. “We all have the opportunity to decrease tension by building an environment that reinforces optimism and happiness,” she said, adding that “people typically wait an average of 6 years after their marriage gets tough before they seek help. Confront the problems sooner and become an active participant in helping your marriage bring out the best in you.”

